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ABSTRACT

In this study 83 regular class teachers (RCTs) evaluated potentially irritating behaviors of special educators. In addition 64 special educators also attempted to predict these ratings using a parallel instrument. Results indicated that RCTs' ratings of special educators' irritating behaviors were lower than predicted by the special educators indicating that special educators predicted the behaviors to be significantly more irritating than they actually were as rated by the regular educators. The five most irritating behaviors of special educators as rated by the regular teachers were: (1) requiring regular teachers to engage in excessive record keeping; (2) having unrealistic expectations regarding the modifications regular teachers can make; (3) being too isolated from the rest of the faculty; (4) not providing enough assistance to regular teachers; and (5) only being concerned about their own students' problems. The survey is attached. (DB)

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A Study of Irritating Behaviors of Special Education Teachers

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Running head: IRRITATING BEHAVIORS

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Abstract

The ratings of special educators' potentially irritating behaviors by regular class teachers (RCTs) were evaluated using a 26-item Likert Scale. Predictions of these ratings were recorded by special class teachers (SCTs) using a parallel instrument. Results indicate that RCTs ratings of SCTs' irritating behaviors were lower than predicted by SCTs. The five most irritating behaviors of special teachers rated by RCTs involved requiring RCTs to engage in excessive record keeping and having unrealistic expectations for RCTs to make class modifications; while SCTs were rated as being too isolated from the rest of the faculty, not providing enough assistance to RCTs, and only being concerned about their own students' problems.

A Study of Irritating Behaviors of Special Education Teachers

Serving students with disabilities with age peers has long been a major goal for special educators (Dunn, 1968; Turnbull, 1986; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1986; Weintraub, 1986). As special and regular education teachers work more closely in serving students with disabilities in settings with age-peers, it is important to continue to evaluate the factors which impact successful cooperation (Schumm & Vaughn, 1991; Whinnery, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 1991). Research in recent years has identified at least two major components needed to develop effective cooperative relationships: Performance factors, including effective communication skills, a repertoire of teaching skills, and interpersonal skills (Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1986; Reisberg & Wolf, 1988) and attitudinal factors such as acceptance of others, role delineation, and expectations (Margolis & McGettigan, 1988; Weissenburger, Fine, & Poggio, 1982).

Of particular interest is the emerging literature on the behaviors and attitudes that are barriers to effective communication (Giangreco, Edleman, and Dennis,

1991; Johnson, and Pugach, 1992; Johnson, Pugach, and Hammitte, 1988). For example, a special education consultant who fails to understand the job demands faced by regular class teachers, may be unable to suggest appropriate intervention strategies or to convince the regular educator to implement recommended strategies (Johnson and Pugach, 1988). Another barrier to cooperative relationships is the extent to which regular educators perceive that special education consultants understand the job demands of the regular class (Furey & Strauch, 1983; Watkins & Brown, 1980). Previous work in this area suggests that both regular and special educators perceive special educators to have a relatively high level of skills regarding their ability to teach students with disabilities (Furey & Strauch, 1983). Conversely, special educators have a much lower perception than regular class teachers of regular educators ability to meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities (Furey & Strauch, 1983).

This study is an initial investigation into those behaviors and attitudes of special educators that are perceived by regular educators as barriers to

effective cooperation. Because it is also important for special educators to be able to accurately judge the perceptions and expectations of those with whom they work cooperatively (Margolis & McGettigan, 1988), the study also investigates the extent to which special class teachers can predict the performance and attitudinal ratings expressed by RCTs. We believe that knowledge of these stated irritations about SCTs' attitudes and practices have significant implications for teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators.

Specific questions investigated by this study include:

1. What behaviors of special education teachers are perceived as most irritating by regular class teachers and how accurately do special teachers predict these ratings?

2. Do the ratings of irritating behaviors of special education teachers differ between RCTS and SCTs.

3. How do regular class teachers judge as irritating the behaviors reflecting the attitudes of special class teachers and how accurately do special class teachers predict these ratings?

4. How do regular class teachers judge the

irritating behaviors reflecting the performance of special class teachers and how accurately do special class teachers predict these ratings?

Method

Two of the authors have been involved in the use of rating scales to assess patterns of irritating behaviors in various educational populations (Dangel, Walker, & Sloop, 1991). The rating scales used in this study were developed based upon this earlier work. A large pool of potentially irritating behaviors was distilled to 26 items using the expert opinion of teachers and college/ university teacher trainers. Of the 26 items, 13 reflected potentially irritating SCT attitudes and 13 potentially irritating SCT performance behaviors. The reliability of this categorization was checked by having three special educators identify which were attitude items and which were behavior items, and was computed using the agreements over agreements plus disagreements times 100 formula (Alberto & Troutman, 1986). The mean reliability for identifying attitude and performance items was .885 (range .846 to .923). Two parallel forms of the scale were generated. The first evaluated

potentially irritating behaviors of SCTs as judged by RCTs. The second scale evaluated the predictions by SCTs of how they thought RCTs would rate their potentially irritating behaviors. For example, item one on the RCT form states "As a regular classroom teacher, it irritates me that special education teachers have a job I don't understand." The same item on the SCT form states "As a special education teacher, I believe that typical regular classroom teachers are irritated because they think that I have a job they don't understand." The order in which the items appear in the scale was randomly assigned. Table 1 presents the 26 RCT items.

The parallel survey forms were distributed to regular and special education teachers who were enrolled in graduate-level courses in education at a large urban university. A total of 147 teachers currently employed in 19 different school systems participated. One hundred percent of those asked completed the questionnaire. Of that number, 83 were regular education teachers and 64 were teachers of students with disabilities, i.e., teachers of mentally retarded, emotionally/behaviorally disordered, and learning disabled. More than 90% of the RCTs and 80% of the SCTs

had taught for two or more years.

Respondents were asked to indicate on a four-point Likert scale the extent to which they "Strongly Agreed", "Somewhat Agreed", "Somewhat Disagreed" and "Strongly Disagreed" with each of the 26 items. A rating of "1" indicated the respondent strongly agreed that the item was irritating whereas a "4" indicated strong disagreement.

Results and Discussion

The first question investigated was "Which behaviors of special education teachers are perceived as most irritating by regular class teachers and how accurately do special class teachers predict these behaviors?" Table 2 presents the five items which RCTs most often selected as characteristic of irritating behavior of special educators, as well as the five items SCTs predicted would be selected by RCTs. None of the items averaged a rating between 1.0 (Strongly Agree) and 2.0 (Somewhat Agree) which would indicate a measure of consensus that RCTs believed that the item reflected irritating behavior. The item rated most negatively by RCTs, "Asks me to keep too many records", had a mean

rating of 2.84, which falls between "Agree Somewhat" and "Disagree Somewhat".

It is of interest to note that three of the five items selected by RCTs (i.e., unreal expectations regarding regular class modifications, being too isolated from the faculty, and only being concerned with problems of special education students) were also selected by SCTs, but not in the same order of choice. SCTs rated the item, "I have a job they don't understand" as the one they thought would be most irritating to RCTs. This item did not appear as one of the five rated highest by RCTs.

Research question 2, "Do the ratings of irritating behaviors differ for the two groups?", was answered by comparing the overall mean ratings for the two groups. The mean rating on the 26 items for RCTs was 3.35 and 2.96 for SCTs. Results of the t-test indicated highly significant differences in the ratings of the two groups $t(50) = 3.79, p<.0004$. These results show SCTs' predicted the 26 behaviors to be significantly more irritating than the actual ratings by the RCTs, although both means were in the "Somewhat Disagree" range of ratings.

The third question was "How do regular class teachers judge the irritating behaviors reflecting the attitudes of special class teachers and how accurately do special class teachers predict these ratings?" The mean rating of 3.36 by the RCTs on the attitude component is a score that falls between Disagree and Strongly Disagree, suggesting that they don't consider many of the statements to indicate problems. The mean rating by SCTs of 2.88 fell between Agree and Disagree. Comparing the overall ratings of irritating attitudes yielded significant differences between the two groups $t(24) = 4.68$, $p < .0001$). These results strongly indicate that SCTs expected their attitudinal behaviors to be more irritating to RCTs than was actually found.

The fourth question raised was "How do regular class teachers judge the irritating behaviors reflecting the performance of special class teachers and how accurately do special class teachers predict these ratings?" RCT ratings of SCT performance yielded a mean rating of 3.18. This suggests RCTs disagreed that items indicating special educators' performance were irritating

to them. The mean performance rating for SCTs was 3.03, and the difference in ratings between the groups was non-significant $t(24) = -1.45$, $p>.160$. Thus, we conclude that SCTs were relatively accurate in predicting the way that RCTs rated their performance behaviors.

No demographic variables, such as years of teaching experience and grade level taught, proved to be significantly related to respondent's ratings.

Implications for Training and Practice

Any interpretation of the results of this investigation must be tempered by the awareness that the results were limited to a group of teachers who were enrolled for graduate coursework.

The results suggest that RCTs do not view a variety of indicators of irritating behavior as characteristic of special educators' performance and attitudes. However, when examining the RCT's five items rated as most irritating, a number of patterns emerge. Three of the items, "keeping too many records", "unreal expectations for modifications", and "not giving enough help", involve performance aspects of special educators. On the one hand, special educators are seen as making

demands on RCTs, and on the other, are perceived as not providing adequate assistance to RCTs. Some previous work suggests that special education consultants are seen by regular educators as having difficulty understanding the "realities" of teaching in a regular class (Johnson, Pugach, & Hammitte, 1988).

In order to improve the working relationship between RCTs and SCTs, teacher educators in special education need to recognize both personal and instructional factors which influence behaviors that are perceived as irritating (Robinson, 1991). Of the top five items selected by regular educators, three dealt with responsibilities which they perceived as burdensome extra demands, i.e., keeping records, expectations for modifications, and giving help.

With regard to the RCTs' concern of being required to keep too many records, whenever possible, the SCT should involve the RCT in planning record keeping procedures. This would include cooperatively developing a rationale for why the information is important, procedures for collecting the information including any necessary designing of checklists and forms, and

agreeing on subsequent application of the data. Another possibility for reducing the demands for record keeping is for the SCTs to teach students in special education programs to employ self-evaluation strategies (Graham, Harris, & Reid, 1992).

With respect to the perception of being asked to make unreal modifications in the regular class, more effective cooperation can be promoted when the SCT has a repertoire of easily implemented, practical suggestions for modifying the regular class. Schumm and Vaughn (1991) and Reisberg and Wolf (1988) provide concise descriptions of modifications which might reasonably be implemented in regular education classrooms.

Suggested modifications are most readily accepted by an RCT when drawn from procedures successfully employed by other RCTs. This practice facilitates the development of a network of RCTs helping one another. In this way, the modifications are seen as being realistic, i.e., another RCT is using them, and there is ample help in implementing the modification through a regular class colleague. SCTs should also indicate how the modifications would benefit not only special education students but any student having similar

learning or behavior problems. Application of effective strategies for students with problems may also free RCTs to spend more time with non-special education students. It is important for the SCT to explicitly communicate to RCTs how these strategies benefit all students.

Concerning the perceived isolation of SCTs from the general faculty, there are at least three suggestions that might be helpful. First, students from the special education class can be involved in projects with regular class students, e.g., older disabled pupils reading or putting on a play for younger students. Second, when possible, integrate the location of special education classrooms with regular classrooms instead of clustering classes for the disabled out of the "mainstream". Third, have the SCTs participate in the responsibilities of the total school program, e.g., sponsoring clubs, sharing bus and cafeteria duty, attending faculty meetings, participating in parent-teacher organizations, and involvement in school festivals and other events.

Viewing the perceived attitudinal concerns of regular educators toward special educators, e.g.,

isolation from other faculty and being concerned with only their students, SCTs should be taught to employ consulting strategies which promote acceptance and understanding between SCTs and RCTs. These might include cooperative planning (Giangreco, Edleman, & Dennis, 1991), active and passive listening, giving and receiving feedback (Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, and Nevin, 1986), and conveying respect and empathy for colleagues (West and Cannon, 1988).

Overall, it appears that RCTs viewed SCTs' attitudes as less irritating than the SCTs had predicted, while performance items were more accurately predicted by SCTs. Special educators need to address those areas found to be of greatest concern to RCTs in order to improve their working relationship with RCTs and thus improve services to students with disabilities.

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Table 1.

Survey of Irritating Behaviors

As a regular classroom teacher, IT IRRITATES ME that SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS:

1. have a job I don't understand.
2. don't have high academic standards.
3. rarely or never compliment me.
4. have it too easy.
5. use too much special education jargon.
6. have an irrelevant job.
7. act as if they are superior.
8. spout theory that is impractical to apply.
9. are a "pain in the neck"
10. make too many excuses for special students.
11. have no immediate answers to problems.
12. ask me to keep too many records.
13. are too isolated from rest of faculty.
14. are responsible for making it difficult to get students into special education.
15. are shown favoritism by the principal.
16. have too many parties, field trips, etc.
17. are uninvolved in the "real work" of school.
18. don't help students.

19. have unrealistic expectations for making regular class modifications.
20. request too many favors for special students.
21. don't give me enough help.
22. are to blame for mainstreaming.
23. are only concerned with students' problems.
24. don't do a fair share of school responsibilities (bus, cafeteria, study hall duty, etc.).
25. lack the experience needed to give me advice.
26. don't listen to my suggestions.

Table 2.

Ratings of most irritating behaviors by regular educators

(Lower scores indicate items more irritating)

		Regular Teachers	Special Teachers
1.	Asks me to keep too many records	(2.82)	(2.84)
2.	Have unreal expectations for making regular class modifications	(2.84)	(2.56)*
3.	Are too isolated from the rest of the faculty	(2.95)	(2.68)*
4.	Don't give me enough help	(2.99)	(3.02)
5.	Are only concerned with their student's problems	(3.04)	(2.62)*

* Also ranked in the top five for special educators.